

Still Homeless

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Introduction

It was to have been the year of hope for homeless people. By the beginning of 2011, we *should* have been entering a new phase in the provision of services for those who are, for whatever reason, out of home. This was to have been the case, because the end of 2010 had been set as the target date for achieving two highly significant developments in relation to services for homeless people – one was the elimination of the need for any person to sleep rough, and the other was the elimination of the need for any person to remain long-term (that is, for more than six months) in an emergency homeless facility. Both these developments had been set out as key objectives in *The Way Home*, the five-year official strategy on homelessness, published by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2008.¹

Thus it was to be that, by the beginning of 2011, two of the most damaging aspects of being without a home would be finally consigned to history. Instead of an endless, repetitive cycle, with homeless people going from hostel to hostel, often for years on end, the 2008 strategy held out to homeless people the promise of having the key to their own door within the foreseeable future.

But it was not to be. Instead, more people became homeless and stayed homeless, and more people were forced to sleep on the streets. In Dublin, where there is the greatest number of homeless people in the country, organisations responding to homelessness have reported a significant increase in demand for their services over the past year. Preliminary results from a ‘count’ in early November 2011 to establish the number of people sleeping rough in Dublin city centre indicate a figure of 87 – as against 60 in April 2011, and 70 in November 2010.²

What went wrong? The central objectives of the 2008 strategy were widely welcomed by those working with homeless people. Its approach was modelled on similar, successful, strategies in New York and Toronto. But, as events were to show, it had one fatal flaw.

The Approach of the 2008 Strategy

The 2008 strategy marked a significant departure from the approach implicit in earlier homeless strategies. The assumption previously was that, in cases where homeless people had addiction problems, mental health difficulties or behaviour problems, they would be unlikely to cope in independent accommodation. It was believed to be almost inevitable that, within a short period of time, they would leave their accommodation, or be evicted.

The focus, therefore, was on encouraging homeless people to get treatment, so that they could be then considered suitable for housing in independent accommodation. The task of project workers was seen as assisting homeless people to progress through various stages of treatment, leading eventually to long-term housing. Housing thus became a goal to be achieved, and was dependent on homeless people successfully addressing their personal issues. This approach could be called ‘treatment first, accommodation second’ in a ‘continuum of care’ model.

The problem with this approach is that it is almost impossible for someone to deal with addiction, mental health or other issues while remaining homeless. Hostels are often full of drugs; walking the streets all day long is hardly conducive to dealing with depression or other mental health problems. This approach is also very expensive: if it is to have any chance of being effective, hostels have to be well staffed with project workers. In reality, the end result was that many homeless people remained for years just going from one hostel to another, never moving out of homelessness to a place of their own.

‘Housing First’

The 2008 homeless strategy marked the clear adoption of a new approach, which could be termed the ‘housing first’ model. In this, the objective is to give homeless people their own accommodation, and *then* offer them whatever support services or help they required. This approach involves a considerable number of support workers being available to them, as appropriate to their needs. But

it is cheaper to provide support services to people in their own homes than to provide never-ending, supervised, hostel accommodation.

In New York and Toronto, where this approach has been operating and evaluated, it was found that, two years after being given independent accommodation, 80 to 90 per cent of previously homeless people had successfully maintained their accommodation. These people were not 'cherry-picked' on the basis of being ready for housing, but rather were chosen randomly from a list of those who had repeatedly failed to work through the 'continuum of care' strategy and had given up on – and been given up by – mainstream homeless services. They were, therefore, people with multiple needs.

It was also found that as a result of the approach adopted there were significant benefits to the health and well-being of those who had been accommodated, with reduced drug use, fewer hospital admissions, fewer arrests and fewer psychiatric admissions. This is hardly surprising – most homeless people dream of having the key to their own front door, so when they do, they are more motivated to deal with their personal issues, and they have the stability which is required for the sometimes very difficult task of changing their lives.

Implementation of the Strategy

The key to the success of the 2008 strategy, and its objectives of eliminating rough sleeping and long-term hostel use, was to be the securing of 1,200 units of accommodation by the target date of 2010. Most of the emergency homeless shelters were then to be closed. However, by the end of 2010, only 300 units of accommodation had become available – but the process of closing the emergency shelters had begun. The result was the large increase in the number of homeless people living on the street which occurred for much of 2011. And, instead of moving towards closing emergency shelters, new shelters had to be opened later in the year to cope with the increased demand. With the failure to achieve these two objectives of the strategy, there was an inevitable failure to achieve its third key objective – 'preventing the occurrence of homelessness as far as possible'.

Why did the strategy fail? It was always doomed to fail because those who had responsibility for implementing it, and achieving its goals, had no control over the supply of long-term

accommodation – they were almost totally dependent on the private sector to lease such accommodation to them.

Why the private sector? Given the economic crisis and the pressure on public finances, the Government has stopped providing capital funding for the building or purchase of social housing; instead, the emphasis is to be on using private sector housing, and in particular leasing arrangements. But the private sector has not been forthcoming to the extent that is needed. And there is no plan B! A strategy which is dependent on the goodwill of others to succeed is not a proper strategy.

Over one-third of homeless people (37 per cent) have been homeless for more than five years; 74 per cent have been homeless for more than one year. For many, instead of finding themselves in a place they could call home in 2011, they found that their homeless shelter was closed and they were being offered sleeping bags to keep them warm during a night on the street. Some homeless people could have opened a little shop with all the sleeping bags they accumulated!

Dependence on the Private Sector

The same flawed approach behind the dependence on the private sector to meet the basic need for shelter is operating for the provision of social housing for all those on the housing waiting lists. During the Celtic Tiger years from 1996 to 2008, the number of social housing units being built or purchased dropped to its lowest level ever in the history of the State – an average of 1,790 net additional units per year, compared to 8,800 units provided in 1975 and 6,500 in 1985. Occurring alongside a dramatic rise in house prices, this low level of provision meant that the number of households on the waiting list for social housing more than doubled during the Celtic Tiger years, from 27,400 in 1996 to over 56,000 in 2008. By 2011, the number had soared again to over 98,000.

This attempt to transfer responsibility for the provision of social housing to the private sector occurred in several different ways.

Part V of the *Planning and Development Act 2000* required developers to sell to the local authority 20 per cent of residential housing output for use as social and affordable housing. In reality, provision of social and affordable housing under this Act averaged 2.8 per cent, over the period 2002 to 2008.

The Act was amended in 2002 to allow developers and builders to transfer parcels of land (often where nobody wanted to live!) or pay cash up-front (which local authorities, desiring to balance their books, found very attractive) in lieu of handing over houses and apartments for social housing. The amendment was to the undisguised satisfaction of the construction sector, which had viewed the original provisions as potentially leading to a reduction in the desirability, and hence the price, of the other houses and apartments in a development.

In the absence of sufficient social housing provision, the private rented sector became the dominant form of housing for many poorer households. It now costs the Government over 500 million euro per year to subsidise this accommodation through rent supplements paid under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme. A significant proportion of this money is being paid to landlords who are providing accommodation that does not comply with minimum standards, and some who are not even registered as landlords (often to evade tax on the rental income).



Still no end to sleeping rough

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The Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) also provides accommodation for those in need of social housing. It differs from the rent supplement scheme in that local authorities reach long-term agreements with a private landlord, thereby providing greater security for the tenant. But it also involves transferring significant amounts of taxpayers' money to private landlords, with no prospect of any capital benefit ever accruing to the State.

The private sector is primarily motivated by profit. It is the responsibility of the State to address basic social needs. The ideological dependence on the private sector to meet social needs has proved to be

both expensive and unsatisfactory.

A particularly stark example of this phenomenon was the failed attempt to regenerate local authority estates through the use of Public Private Partnerships (PPP). Had such regeneration been undertaken with local authorities as the drivers of the process, and with a clear commitment to the provision of social housing as the priority, several large estates which had long experienced serious physical and social deterioration could have been regenerated while the economy was still growing. Instead, a central Government directive required that all regeneration projects be provided through a PPP. Existing plans, which had been negotiated with local communities, were shelved and new plans, costing millions more, was drawn up without the involvement of local communities, leaving them angry, frustrated and feeling disempowered. With the downturn in the economy, and the severe contraction of the construction sector, the private sector partners pulled out and the regeneration plans shelved indefinitely. Communities were left in estates that were now often in a markedly poorer condition than they had been before the whole process began.

Quality of Emergency Accommodation

While there is little prospect of many homeless people getting the key to their own door while the homeless strategy continues to depend on the private sector to provide long-term accommodation, the new emergency shelters will, it is to be hoped, provide all homeless people with a bed for the night. However, the *quality* of the accommodation on offer is a critical issue.

Most of the complaints about hostels I hear from homeless people relate to having to share a room with one, two or three strangers – or even as many as fourteen in dormitory-style accommodation. Homeless people regularly report that they wake up in the morning to find that the person or persons with whom they had shared a hostel room overnight will have already departed – having stolen their money, their trainers, and sometimes their medication. Others, who had never taken drugs, report sharing a room with active drug users, who inject heroin in front of them during the night and, in a spirit of friendship, offer to share their drugs with them. Some people, fed up, depressed, and seeing no future for themselves, succumb and accept the offer.

Homeless people, like the rest of us, have a right to

feel safe. A single room, with a door which can be locked, where a person can sleep safely and where his or her belongings are secure, is a minimum requirement, which all of us would want for ourselves.

It is not sufficient just to provide a roof over someone's head; we have to do so in a way that respects the dignity of the person. To respect someone's dignity is, in the first place, to ensure that they feel safe. However, in the current economic climate, securing funding for single room accommodation in hostels will be very difficult. There is pressure on all agencies to accommodate as many homeless people as possible – under the guise of value for money. Some homeless people actually feel safer sleeping on the streets, which is a stark indication of the insecurity which people feel in shared emergency accommodation – and a terrible indictment of our society. Others feel forced, against their will, to share a room with strangers because they may be refused welfare payments unless they do so.

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It is time for all the voluntary agencies involved in the provision of homeless services to agree a protocol whereby they will provide only single room accommodation. Homeless people are, by definition, in a position of extreme vulnerability. Our society should not add to the vulnerability and hardship of their situation by a failure to ensure a minimum level of safety and security in the temporary accommodation they must use.

The Bureaucracy

Homeless people are often caught in a bureaucracy, which has been designed for the benefit of the bureaucracy.

John had gone to England when he was fifteen years of age. He ended up in prison there. On completion of his sentence, he was deported back to Ireland. He arrived in the country with no money and no arrangements for accommodation. He tried to get a welfare payment, but he was refused because he had no address. He went to get emergency accommodation so that he would have an address. He couldn't be given accommodation

until he was registered as homeless with Dublin City Council. Dublin City Council couldn't register him as homeless because he had no PPS number in Ireland. He went to an office of the Revenue Commissioners to get a PPS number, but was told he couldn't be given one until he had an address. Two days walking around Dublin, going from one service to another, resulted only in John arriving back where he had started.

Of course, without a PPS number, John *could* be fiddling the system, claiming welfare under several different names from several different addresses. Each service had its own boxes to tick; John's difficulties were not their problem.

Jim was living in a private rented flat in a provincial town. The house went on fire and his flat was destroyed. He tried to get a bed in the local emergency homeless hostel, but there was no place available. His welfare payments were stopped because he no longer had an address. Jim came to Dublin to seek homeless accommodation. He found he could not be offered such accommodation unless he was registered with Dublin City Council as homeless. He went to register with the Council but officials there refused to register him as homeless, since he was considered to be the responsibility of the local authority in his home area. He was then unable to get welfare payments in Dublin as he had no address in the city. He returned to his home town but the hostel there was still full. The social welfare office there still refused him a payment as he was not living in the hostel. He came back to Dublin, slept rough and begged for his food. He got arrested for begging.

Of course, it is understandable that the authorities do not want people registering as homeless with different local authorities. It adds to their waiting lists, imposes extra costs on their services and makes social housing planning more difficult. But the result is that, effectively, homeless people are trapped in the area from which they come; they cannot move to another area to look for employment or to seek treatment for an addiction or for mental health problems. In other words, homeless people end up bearing the real cost of systems that often seem to be designed for administrative convenience.

Joe went to the Post Office to collect his welfare payment. He was asked to provide photo identification to prove that he was indeed the person to whom the payment was due. The usual

photo identification required is either a passport or full driving licence. But most homeless people do not have either document. An alternative form of identification is a Garda Age Card. But the Garda Age Card costs 10 euro and Joe had no money. Joe borrowed the money to pay for an Age Card. He went to the Garda station to get it signed. The Garda would not sign it unless he could produce photo identification to prove that he was the person named on the Age Card. He also needed a birth certificate. However, although he had lived all his life in Ireland, he had been born in England. It costs 24 euro to obtain a birth certificate from England. Joe cannot get his documentation without money, but he cannot get money without documentation.

The requirement to show photo identification in order to collect a welfare payment is a reasonable one, as there have been numerous reports of strangers finding – or robbing – a person’s PPS card, which does not have a photograph attached, and collecting their money by forging the person’s signature. But no-one could tell Joe how he was supposed to get a birth certificate and photo identification without any money. The Post Office said it was not their problem, the welfare office said it was not their problem, the Gardaí said it was not their problem – different agencies with different boxes to tick, but no-one responsible for sorting out Joe’s dilemma.

Life is very frustrating for homeless people at the best of times. But a bureaucracy that doesn’t work, and a strategy that does not deliver, make life much more frustrating. Homeless people need, and deserve, better.

Notes

1. Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, *The Way Home: A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness in Ireland 2008–2013*, Dublin, 2008 (www.environ.ie).
2. See Carl O’Brien, ‘Sleeping rough in capital rises 45%’, *The Irish Times*, Monday, 21 November 2011; Kitty Holland, ‘Internet cafes prove an unlikely refuge for city’s homeless’, *The Irish Times*, Friday, 2 December 2011.

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